Commitment, Communication & Connection: Understanding Participation in Online Communities from Multiple Perspectives

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COMMITMENT, COMMUNICATION, & CONNECTION:
UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES
FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Online communities have become a major medium for social interaction amongst Internet users. Despite the profusion of online communities, the abundance of individuals and content do not necessarily lead the community to success. Individual communities commonly face issues related to attracting and maintaining members, a key resource of online communities. The primary focus of this dissertation is to compliment and further develop what we currently understand about participation in online communities, and subsequently its members, diversity, and inter-workings. One key to this is to more fully understand the ways in which individuals can behave within an online community. Towards this end, one goal of this dissertation is to move the view of community participation beyond the generally utilized “frequency of contribution” conceptualization to a broader one that accounts for various types of community behaviors that need to be performed by a community’s member (e.g. community citizenship behavior, audience engagement, and content contribution). With this in mind, this dissertation will adapt three theoretical perspectives that offer complimentary perspectives of the dynamics of community participation: participation as an individual-community relationship (commitment), participation as media use (communication), and participation as social ties (connection).

Keywords: Online communities, virtual communities, participation, commitment, communication, referrals, online behavior
“I sense an insatiable demand for connectivity. Maybe all these people have discovered important uses for the Internet. Perhaps some of them feel hungry for a community that our real neighborhoods don’t deliver. At least a few must wonder what the big deal is.” – Clifford Stoll

**Introduction**

With widespread adoption of the Internet, finding individuals who share a common interest, regardless of its obscurity, has never been easier. The Internet hosts an ever-increasing collection of tools (e.g., list-servers, newsgroups, discussion groups, MUDs, chat rooms, bulletin boards, or Wikis) that help people who share common interests connect with each other. Over time these tools, coupled with individuals’ desire to capitalize on the collective efforts of like minded individuals across a variety of domains and interests, have lead to the creation of online communities, each with their own purposes, leaders, members, social structures, norms of interaction, and community resources. These communities now play an integral role as a global knowledge sharing media, providing people with both personal and economic benefits.

Despite the profusion of online communities, the abundance of individuals and content do not necessarily lead the community to success. While some community oriented ventures have been able to achieve extreme levels of success, such as MySpace and Wikipedia, this is not the norm. Rather individual communities commonly face issues related to attracting and maintaining members – the key resource of online communities (Butler 2001). As online communities depend on the voluntary efforts of their members (e.g., the creation of content, the shaping of community norms, providing ongoing traffic) to remain viable entities (Butler et al. forthcoming), obtaining an improved understanding of member related dynamics is imperative.

One of the more heavily studied questions in the online community literature that been focused on why individuals participate in an online community. Recent research efforts have resulted in a rather rich body of literature that identifies various factors that motivate individuals’ community participation. The widespread conceptualization of participation suggests that it is synonymous with resource contribution. Not surprising, this perspective explains that participation is driven by resource oriented factors (e.g., cost-benefit analysis, free-riding, public good dilemma) or motivated by individuals’ pro-social feelings (e.g., of altruism, reciprocity). However, this focus on sharing oriented content contribution as the defining characteristic of community participation has created some limitations. One such limitation is that while the creation of content is important, focusing exclusively on content contribution draws attention away from other aspects of participatory community behaviors. There are other types of community behaviors that play essential roles in growing and maintaining a community – ultimately factoring into a community’s viability (Butler 2001; Hall 2001; Williams and Cothrel 2000). Additionally, by ignoring these other types of key behaviors, the implied importance of member homogeneity could be overstated, suggesting that a community’s ability to achieve success is tied to its ability to create a homogenous member base around a set of ideal characteristics. Combined these issues adversely impact our collective understanding of online communities. As such, obtaining a better understanding as to why, and how, individuals participate in an online community remains as important research questions.

**Objectives of Dissertation**

The overall purpose of the dissertation is to compliment and further develop what we currently understand about participation in online communities, and subsequently its members, diversity, and inter-workings. A secondary objective of this dissertation is to move the generally utilized view of community participation beyond a frequency of contribution conceptualization to a broader one that incorporates various types of community behaviors that need to be performed by a community’s members. To meet these objectives, this dissertation will adapt three theoretical perspectives that offer complimentary perspectives of the dynamics of community participation: participation as an individual-community relationship, participation as media use, and participation as social ties. Each theoretical perspective is developed and specific aspects are tested in separate papers.

**Broader View of Participation**

As mentioned, there has been much research aimed at understanding why individuals participate in an online community. However, much of the work associated with this question has equated participation to content contribution. As a result, this research has largely focused on identifying the influential factors that impact an individual’s decisions to share with others,
by contributing content, within online communities. While the creation of content is important, focusing exclusively on content contribution, especially through sharing oriented lenses, draws attention away from other important community involvement behaviors. Communities’ sustainability ultimately depends on the continued involvement of individual members (Wasko and Faraj 2000; Williams and Cothrel 2000), with such involvement including a wide range of behaviors (Kim 2000).

Content oriented views of participation overlook the crucial role of member created, communicated, and regulated norms have in the success of an online community (Kim 2000; Preece 2004). Additionally, a member’s role as audience member (i.e. readers of content) is typically neglected. However, this behavior serves a key function in community building as it signals to others that the community is active, vibrant, and possesses a pool of potential resources (Butler 2001) that are potentially willing to answer questions, engage in conversations, and establish social bonds (Markus 1990). These other types of community behaviors that play an essential role in growing and maintaining a community must also be studied to more fully understand a complete picture of participation in online communities. As such, one objective of this dissertation is to move the view of community participation beyond the generally utilized frequency of contribution conceptualization to a broader one that accounts for various types of community behaviors that need to be performed by a community’s members. Three types of community participatory behaviors are drawn from the literature: community citizenship behaviors, content provision, and audience engagement.

**Participation as Individual – Community Relationship**

A central focus of research in organizational behavior is providing explanations of organizational membership, primarily attempting to understand why individuals choose to join and stay in organizations. Specifically, research focusing on understanding individual commitment to an organization has produced a rich body of research that examines this question, as well as how this commitment impacts the individuals’ performance of various behaviors within an organization. Organizational commitment is a psychological bond that characterizes an individual’s relationship with an organization, and this commitment has implications for an individual’s decision to continue or discontinue membership in the organization (Meyer and Allen 1991 p. 67). Commitment theory argues that individuals’ can develop three kinds of commitment bonds to their organization that are associated with their feelings of attachment to it – affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment. Applying this theoretical framework to examine member participation and the relationships that arise between individuals and online communities enriches the online community literature by bridging a connection between online, virtual organizations to a rich body of established literature. This framework is tested using data collected from a survey instrument as well as archival usage data collected from a research community’s server. A summary of the research model and findings are presented in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. PLS Path Model](image)
Participation as Media Use

Understanding differences in individuals’ characteristics (e.g., free-riding, altruism, reciprocity) has been a central focus of existing research which seeks to explain differences in behavior. This research speaks to practitioners and suggests that the environment of the community can be designed in a way so as to manipulate behavior. However, work using these sharing oriented perspectives share several key assumptions. First, as individuals share a common interest they also have similar needs related to this interest. Secondly, the similarity of interest impacts individuals’ behaviors in similar ways.

One recurring theme in the literature is that members share a common interest, implying that users are passive in their selection of a community so long as it is related to their common interest. However, a common interest may only serve as a beacon for a community’s presence and an invitation to participate. In fact, individuals may be more active in their choice of media than existing views would suggest. Ultimately the decision and rationale used in choosing to use a community among members is not a similar; rather, the choice is strongly tied to diverse individual personal needs (that may, or may not be, interest centric or community focused). Subsequently, the differences in community members’ behaviors are a result of how members perform various types of behaviors in an attempt to fulfill their specific needs.

Uses and Gratification Theory (Katz et al. 1974) suggests that individuals play an active role in selecting media to use and how to use it, and the choice of use is driven by a set of personal needs. An individual’s selection to use media is influenced by how well he believes it will meet this set of needs. Additionally, individuals behave differently even when selecting the same media, based on their inherent needs. While the use of media has been associated with a variety of needs across a variety of studies (and media), the personal needs typically associated with Uses and Gratification Theory include: cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, and social integrative needs. This second paper adapts a Uses and Gratification Theory approach to examine various forms of community participation. Uses and Gratification Theory suggests that individuals use online communities in different ways to fill different needs. Specifically, in the case of online communities, it is not just the choice to use (or not use) the media that is an active choice. Individuals also actively choose how to use and interact with the media. An early stage working research model is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

![Figure 2. Working Research Model – Uses and Gratification Theory](image)

Participation as Social Tie

Online communities can be conceptualized as virtual spaces embedded within networks of individuals. Using this perspective, one potential benefit of online communities is the ability to capitalize on the existing ties of individuals through member referrals. When existing members recommend the community to individuals, these potential new members already have existing ties with the community. Using referrals in online communities has been recommended to community administrators in practitioner oriented works (Kim 2000). However, these recommendations have been based largely on
circumstantial or anecdotal evidence, while the true impact of referrals have on shaping online communities and on individuals’ participatory behaviors remains an untested question.

Referrals play an important role in traditional organizations. In addition to the organization referral literature, this paper draws upon the literature on homophily. Homophily is a principle which suggests that contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people (McPherson et al. 2001), and that this plays an important role in self-forming groups. Utilizing these literatures, the third paper examines the role referrals have on shaping the community through members’ participation, examining if/how the community behaviors (content contribution and audience engagement) differ between non-referred members and referred members, as the organizational literature would suggest. Additionally, the impact of the referrer (existing member) to referee (new member) relationships is examined to see if a referrer’s behavior is a good predictor of a referee’s behavior in the community, as homophily would advocate.

References


